

Aberdeen Gardens Wins Top Award

Hampton's Aberdeen Gardens beat out 11 other finalists to win the prestigious "Neighborhood of the Year" award at the 27th annual Neighborhoods USA contest announced in May in Houston, Texas. The award was the culmination of a grassroots effort to restore a neighborhood property for use as a museum. In addition to winning the overall title, the Aberdeen Gardens and Civic Association also won first place in the "Multi-Neighborhood Project Partnerships–Physical Revitalization" category. The national recognition furthers the mission of the Aberdeen Gardens Historic and Civic Association: "To enhance the quality of life for all citizens in Historic Aberdeen Gardens and adjacent neighborhoods, with an emphasis on heritage, to become the most livable community in the U.S." Their total prize money of \$2,000 will go toward furnishing the neighborhood museum to be opened this fall.

With the help of Department of Historic Resources' programs like the state and national register and state grant programs, the citizens of Aberdeen Gardens have not only strengthened their community, but they have also made the neighborhood a site of recognized historic value. Since 1994, the citizens have worked diligently to launch the museum, and their long-term goal is to create a bed-and-breakfast community featuring a farmer's market. In addition to housing travelers, residents plan to farm their large gardens and sell the produce in the market to generate funds for further restoration and preservation in Aberdeen Gardens.

The museum will operate in one of the Aberdeen historic dwellings, a building acquired through the Healthy Neighborhoods initiative, in which Hampton officials partnered with neighborhood groups to help develop strategic plans. The New Deal-era

house will be restored to its original condition, including all of the furnishings, heating system, chicken coop, and thriving garden complete with fruit trees, just as it was in when the first family settled there in the mid-1930s. Historic memorabilia such as pictures, association history, plaques, and other recognitions the neighborhood has received will also be on display.

When Aberdeen Gardens was built during the Roosevelt Administration, it was unlike any other community of its kind. As one of 55 resettlement planned communities in the nation, Aberdeen Gardens was the only such community created by and for African American workers. The aim of the program was to help them leave their previous environment, achieve a higher social and health level, and grow much of their own food. Because most of the residents worked in the nearby shipyards and the summer months were slow in the shipbuilding industry, the land provided a much-needed opportunity for self-subsistence. Resettlement Administration developers centered the plan on the stipulation that the residents purchase their homes in order to enhance community permanence and pride.

Each three-quarters-of-an-acre yard contained apple, peach, and pear trees, as well as a chicken coop that housed chicks and laying hens. The acreage allowed for cows and mules for gardening. Each brick house had indoor plumbing, electricity, an Arcola furnace with water-filled radiator heating, and an attached garage with a porch. In 1937, the first families moved in. To further enhance the residents' pride in their heritage, the streets of the original roads were named after well-known African Americans of the 1930s. The community, which Eleanor Roosevelt visited in 1938, was unprecedented in the South and in the United States because African Americans planned and designed it,

cleared the site, constructed the buildings, worked on the roads, and managed the program. Its residents have remained for generations.

In 1992, Aberdeen Gardens and Civic Association, Inc., was created, which in 1994 spawned a movement to designate the community a historic district. With the guidance of Evelyn Daniel Chandler, an original Aberdeener, along with the Aberdeen Association members and residents, and assistance from Department of Historic Resources' staff, Aberdeen was designated a Virginia historic landmark in February 1994 and added to the National Register of Historic Places three months later. Chandler, as a result of her spirited and unflagging leadership, was appointed to the department's State Review Board. In 2000, the Aberdeen Gardens Historic and Civic Association, Inc., acquired one of the Aberdeen historic houses, and received and matched a \$100,000 grant through the Department of Historic Resources.

Today the 65-year-old neighborhood, with its 158 brick dwellings, elementary school, and strip mall, has 193 members in its association with 22 committees. The award the association won in May was only one in a series of many honors. Aberdeen Gardens has also been featured on the Home and Garden Television (HGTV) special "Restoring America," and highlighted as one of Virginia's great preservation success stories in the Department of Historic Resources' publications, including *Putting Virginia's History To Work: Virginia's Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan*. Aberdeen Gardens is an especially impressive program because community members take such pride in their neighborhood, and because 50% of the residents are descendants of the original families that moved in between 1937 and 1940. Jacqueline Arrington, one of the descendants and a presenter at the Houston conference, expressed her pride in the

neighborhood's accomplishments by saying, "We are elated, and we never dreamed that by coming together for a common cause our community could rise to the level it has today. It is a magnificent feeling!"